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How to Talk to Children About War and Terrorism

REVIEWED SEP 25, 2006

Growing up has never been easy. It's especially difficult for young people in times of crisis. We owe it to our children to listen to what is on their minds and in their hearts and give them the best of our understanding and our guidance.

Parents wonder if they should protect their children from the grim reality, explore the topic or share their personal beliefs. Some adults feel that they must reconcile the dilemma of advocating non-violence while explaining terrorism and war. This dilemma is made more complex by the desire to provide explanations about violence in the world, while at the same time encouraging children's natural sense of curiosity. We want children to feel free to come to us with questions and concerns. In addition, we know that it is important that young children be reassured about their own safety and the safety of their parents and loved ones. So where does this leave us? Following are some pointers for dealing with these issues.

Discuss the difference between anger and hate.

Children of different ages may ask why some people or groups hate us just because we are Americans. It may help to explain the difference between anger—an emotion the child can relate to—and hatred or prejudice. Anger is a normal human emotion that arises when we feel violated or cheated or harmed. Anger can lead to constructive solutions to problems when we learn to control our emotions and find common ground. Alternatively, hatred is taught, and dictates that certain people or groups of people are not worthy of respect, compassion or even life. Talking with your children about the horrible consequences of race hatred and bigotry will help them appreciate the value of all human life and may help them stand up to injustice in their own lives. Remember that you don't have to have all of the answers in order to instill the values of your family.

In times of violent conflict, some people dehumanize the residents of countries whose governments are in conflict with their own. Sometimes this dehumanization process extends to people who came from or whose relatives emigrated from that region. By helping young people to understand the human and environmental consequences of war for all those involved, they can become more sensitive to other people's feeling and points of view.

Limit the child's exposure to negative media images .

Parents may want to limit the amounts of television news based on the age and maturity of children

in the household. Talking to your children about what they do watch or hear will help them put frightening information into a more balanced and reasonable context.

- *Preschool age children* may be the most upset by the sights and sounds they are exposed to. They may confuse facts with their fantasies and fears, and can easily be overwhelmed. They may have real fears of being separated from parents, being harmed, or about punishment.
- *School-age children* can certainly understand the difference between fantasy and reality but may have trouble keeping them separate. News stories can be internalized and transformed into something that might happen to them. These children are also in the midst of peer struggles and are developing a mature moral outlook. Concerns about fairness and punishment will be more prevalent among this age group.
- *Middle- and high-school-age children* may be interested and intrigued by the politics of a situation and feel a need to take a stand or take action.
- *Teenagers*, like adults, may become reflective about life, re-examining their priorities and interests. They may also respond by searching for information, answers and justice.

Children of all ages appreciate talking with adults they trust.

When speaking with your child, be sure to use words that they can understand. Use simple, short words and straightforward explanations. Whatever your children's ages, they deserve honest answers and explanations, but the level of detail should match their ability to comprehend the situation. It is quite likely that they will have some confusion about the facts. We can offer the opportunity to dispel myths that may be overly frightening, and to listen and talk with our children about their concerns. Let the child's words guide the direction of the discussion. By listening patiently, we allow our children to think at their own pace, and at the same time we communicate that they are worthy of our time and respect.

Responding to children's questions or concerns in an appropriate, supportive way will help them begin to understand our complex world, and will also help to strengthen their ability to trust. You may also want to say that you share some of the same feelings they are experiencing. Expressing your own feelings of grief about what happens in a war is a good way to help children learn compassion and empathy. Finally, remind the child that you will be together during these difficult times.

Observe children's behavior .

Be aware of signals young children send out through their play, their drawing and writing, and their spontaneous conversation. War play is a common phenomenon, particularly among young boys. Many use it to explore the messages they are exposed to about war and terrorism. War play can be utilized as an opportunity to discuss what the games mean to them. Preadolescent boys, especially, may have a fascination with the violence that is portrayed in the media. For older children and adolescents, important issues are raised about the ethics of violence and the ways conflicts are best resolved. Young people can derive hope by learning about conflict resolution and developing concrete skills in nonviolent problem solving. You can discuss their opinions about how they think

current personal and political conflicts might be resolved.

Communicate that it is OK to be concerned about the state of the world.

Although it is healthy to admit that you and other adults are concerned by current events, it is important to help children find a way to step out of their position of powerlessness. One way to help children grapple with difficult issues is to explain that people's concern is the first step toward doing something to make the world safer. Engage them in a conversation about the ways in which their school is working toward creating a safer community and how they might get involved. It will also help to provide reassurance through positive and hopeful comments such as, "There are a lot of people working to keep our schools and neighborhoods safe."

Discuss how retaliation can escalate conflict rather than end it.

We can help young people understand that in a conflict, when one party retaliates, the other party usually gets angrier and often chooses to strike back, thereby further escalating the situation. Children can relate to examples of conflict in their daily lives, and may be able to identify situations where anger escalated, and others where issues were resolved more peacefully. They may be able to describe actions they took to help reach a resolution, such as asking for a teacher or older child to assist in working out a solution. Similarly, we can remind youngsters that many people around the world are working to see that justice is done. They are trying to figure out who helped commit acts of terrorism and bring them before courts of law.

Help children feel empowered.

Sometimes simply knowing the facts can lead to anxiety, fear and powerlessness. Help young people to overcome these feelings by engaging them in taking actions that make a difference. One of the most important actions children can take is to learn how to make a difference in their own worlds. It is important that children generate and implement the actions they choose to pursue. Providing a caring network both at home and at school is reassuring to children. Young people have many questions about violence and conflict in the world. Helping children and teens explore different answers to these questions, and assisting them in learning about ways they can deal with conflict creatively is empowering for all of us.

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